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ABSTRACT

The study contrasts Acadian English (Cajun) spoken in Louisiana with the local standard English, describing the linguistic features (pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary) of the dialect in non-technical language. The objective is to inform elementary and secondary school teachers and others involved in education and curriculum development for a population including Cajun students. Data were drawn from analysis of taped sessions with K-12 children from over 30 schools, interviews with 225 teachers in predominantly French-speaking communities, and analysis of works by Cajun authors, including dialect writings, humorous anecdotes, newspaper articles, local dictionaries, fiction, and folklore. The information is presented in the form of charts and outlines, without narrative. Specific phonological features are listed with phonetic transcription and forms in standard and Cajun English are contrasted. Grammatical features for various form classes are listed, again with standard and Cajun forms contrasted. Lexical features of Cajun are listed in four categories: common expressions; widely-used French expressions; favorite foods; and miscellaneous items. (MSE)

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A STUDY OF THE LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF CAJUN ENGLISH

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Systematic research of the language of children continues to be a vital part of learning and curriculum studies. One important aspect of language research has been the study of divergent dialects and their relationship to school achievement.

The major purpose of this research was to begin a systematic contrastive study of Acadian English (more popularly known as "Cajun" English in Southwest Louisiana) and local standard English. Approximately 900,000 in number, this group has had the highest rate of illiteracy in the United States for the last two decades. There is no information in the professional literature to date which makes more than a cursory mention of the educational dilemma posed by this group, and research on the language of the Cajuns has centered primarily on attempts to describe the unique French which is spoken by older members of this group, but seldom (if ever) used by children in current school settings.

This study focuses on a description of Acadian English as it contrasts with the local standard English. The linguistic features of the dialect are described in non-technical language, but in sufficient detail to be useful to classroom teachers as well as others involved in learning and curriculum research. Data was collected from the following sources:

1) analysis of tape transcriptions of oral language sessions with children from over thirty different schools, grades K-12
2) interviews with 225 teachers in predominantly French speaking communities in a four-parish area
3) analysis of works by Cajun authors including dialect writings, humorous anecdotes, newspaper articles, joke books, local "dictionaries," fiction and folkore

The linguistic features of the dialect are described under the following categories: pronunciation; grammar; vocabulary. A few items have been excerpted from each category to serve as an example of what constitutes a major portion of the study.

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PHONOLOGICAL FEATURES

		Key Words	
	IPA	SE	CE
1. Modification of the consonant /s/	/s/ = /z/	sink	zink
		gas	gaz
2. Simplification of the consonant cluster /th/	/θ/ = /t/	thick	tick
		bath	bat
3. Simplification or modification of some final consonant clusters			
/sk/ = /kst/	/sk/ = /ks/	asked	axed
/nd/ = /n/	/nd/ = /n/	kind	kine
/nt/ = /n/	/nt/ = /n/	went	wen
/st/ = /s/	/st/ = /s/	cost	cos
/lm/ = /m/	/lm/ = /m/	calm	cam
/ct/ = /k/	/kt/ = /k/	act	ak
4. Deletion of /r/ in medial and final position		Robert	Robet
		tired	tied
5. Deletion or modification of some final consonants			
/l/		simple	simpuh
/k/		like	lie
6. Devoicing of some initial and final consonants and consonant clusters			
/th/ = /d/	/ð/ = /d/	then	den
/t/ = /d/	/t/ = /d/	tomato	domato
/v/ = /f/	/v/ = /f/	leave	leaf

		Key Words	
	IPA	SE	CE
7. Vowel modifications			
/ĕ/ = /ā/	/ɛ/ = /e/	egg	agg
/ĕ/ = /ă/	/ɛ/ = /æ/	very	vary
		yellow	yallow
		jet	jat
		ten	tan
/ī/ = /ä/	/aɪ/ = /ɑ/	I	ah
/ĭ/ = /ē/	/ɪ/ = /i/	itch	eetch
/ĭ/ = /ă/	/ɪ/ = /æ̃/	friend	fran
/ī/ = /ă/	/aɪ/ = /æ/	like	lak
/ā/ = /ē/	/e/ = /i/	plane	pleen
/ă/ = /ŏ/	/æ/ = /ɑ/	man	mon
/ŭ/ = /ô/	/ʌ/ = /ɔ/	lunch	lonch
		uncle	oncle
/oi/ = /ô/	/ɔɪ/ = /ɔ/	oil	all
/ŭ/ = /ō/	/ʌ/ = /o/	won	wone
8. Selected vowels are pronounced as nasals, as seen in French		uncle	oncle
		don't	don
		friend	fran
9. Second syllable stress on words that usually have first syllable stress		straw'berry	straw berry'

GRAMMATICAL FEATURES

	SE	CE
1. Nouns		
a. Plural overgeneralization	gray hair	gray hairs
	underwear	underwears
b. Deletion of plural	blue jeans	blue jean
	strawberries	strawberry
2. Verbs	SE	CE
a. Use of went to indicate action completed	We went to the show.	We went go to the show.
	I took Cloie to the doctor.	I went take Cloie to doctor.
b. Change in verb conjugation	had gone	had went
c. Change in tense	He gave me some soup for lunch.	He give me some soup for lunch.
d. Deletion of linking verbs	We are going to my mommas.	We goin to my Mommas.
e. Omission of modals and auxiliaries in questions	What did I do?	What I do?
f. Deletion of ed	He is married to Janice.	He is marry to Janice.
g. Use of bring in the place of take	I am going to take Joe to the doctor.	I'm goin bring Joe to the doctor.
3. Noun-Verb agreement	He has	He have
	They weren't	They wasn't

	SE	CE
4. Pronouns		
a. Intensifying pronoun form and order change	I'm going. They weren't clapping.	I'm going, me. They weren't clapping, them.
b. Substitution of them for those	See those nutria.	See them nutria.
c. Use of pronominal apposition	Troy came home.	Troy he come home.
5. Possessives		
a. Substitution of you for your	He came into your house.	He come into you house.
b. Deletion of markers	They wash people's houses.	They wash people houses.
6. Deletion of infinitive construction	I'm going to get it.	I'm going get it.
7. Adverbs and adjectives		
a. Addition of s to selected adverbs	anyway somewhere anywhere	anyways somewheres anywheres
b. Omission of ly	He ran slowly.	He ran slow.
8. Ellipsis	"You sure are dirty." Reply - "And so are you."	"You sure are dirty." Reply - "An you!"
9. Sentence Patterns		
a. Inversion of question form	Can I sharpen my pencil?	I can sharpen my pencil?
b. Use of yes and no for emphasis	I can't go to the store. That's mine.	I can't go to the store, no. That's mine, yes.
c. Placement of there	We spent one day there.	We spent there one day.

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LEXICAL DIFFERENCES

a. Common Expressions

1. "Get down." (get out of a car)
2. "Save the dishes." (put something away in the cupboard, refrigerator, etc.)
3. "I'm going to have a party. Why don't you make a little pass?" (to make a pass, or pass by, means to stop and visit, or go to a certain place)
4. "She fell sick." (to become sick or ill)
5. "Come see." (to ask someone to "come here" to listen or pay attention)
6. "My car caught a flat." (both of these expressions mean that a vehicle has gotten a flat tire)
   "It's on a flat." (my bicycle)
7. "Take off the light." (turn it off)
8. "Peel pecans" (to shell them)
9. "Pass a good time" (to have a good time)

b. French expressions or words which are widely used

1. bouder (bōōdā - to pout)
2. fouiller (fōōyā - to dig around in)
3. nannan and parrain (nanan and paraṅ - godmother and godfather)
4. grandmere and granpere (grommear and gronpear)
5. tante (toṅ - aunt); noncle (noṅk - uncle)
6. paque (päkā - to "knock" eggs together at Easter
7. cher (shă - an expression meaning dear or precious - as in "Oh cher!")
8. choupique (shōōpik - a mud trout)
9. pirogue (pēerogue - a flat bottom boat)

c. Favorite foods

1. boudin (bo͞odaṅ - pork gut filled with rice dressing)
2. gratons (grăto͞ns - cracklings, or fried pork skins)
3. cush-cush (fried corn meal eaten with milk as a cereal)
4. gumbo (a thin soup with any of the following: seafood, sausage, chicken, okra; served with a scoop of rice)
5. roux (ro͞o - an oil and flour base used in making gumbo and
6. file (fēelā - a powdered seasoning used in gumbo and other dishes)
7. jambalaya (a rice and meat or shrimp casserole)
8. etoufee (ātō͞ofā - a sauce made with shrimp or crawfish, served over rice)

d. Others

1. lagniappe (a little something extra)
2. bourree (bo͞oray - a Cajun card game)
3. fais dodo (a Cajun dance)
4. T-Norman ("T" is commonly placed in front of names as a nickname.)

CONCLUSIONS

The language system of the Cajun child is disparate from the textbooks and local standard English used by teachers. Some of the phonological and syntactic changes appear to be a direct result of the French which is the native language of the Acadian. In addition, there are many peculiarities of the vocabulary. Some are simply French words interspersed with English, while others are possibly loan translations.

Language has always played a vital role in success in the classroom. In order to begin to raise the literacy level of the Acadian communities, teachers must become familiar with the language system used by the children. Not only is this knowledge necessary for maximum growth in self concept, but it will facilitate the mastery of oral and written communication skills, as well as allow the teacher to more effectively distinguish dialectal renditions from word recognition errors in the reading class and focus on the more important aspects of comprehension which are essential in achieving spoken and written literacy.

On a much broader level, it is hoped that this work, along with its conclusions and recommendations, will lend support to a continuing study of the educational issues involved with low literacy groups in the United States. The Cajun is only one of many ethnic groups in this country which suffers from a rigid curriculum and philosophy of learning which continues to ignore the unique language and educational needs of its children.